
Great Britain

Major sags in polls, tries 'Falklands' card

by Mark Burdman

For the first time since the British election campaign began in earnest in mid-March, polls released on March 31 showed the British Labour Party taking a commanding lead of 7% among voters polled. Should this lead be preserved on voting day April 9, Labour would have enough votes to gain a majority in the Parliament, and to form a Labour Party government. It is likely more than coincidence that the Conservative government, on that same March 31, chose to escalate the confrontation with Libya. Desperate Tory advisers may believe that only a last-minute flight-forward performance by the lackluster Prime Minister John Major can retrieve their electoral chances.

In the days leading up to the April 9 vote, Major began playing what the British press has labeled "the Falklands card." April 2 was the 10th anniversary of Argentina's 1982 invasion of the Malvinas Islands (which the British, who seized them in the early 19th century, refer to as "the Falklands"). Major accused Labour leader Neil Kinnock of wanting to appease Argentina on this issue, asking demagogically, "I wonder what message that gives to the soldiers, airmen, and navymen who actually fought in that war and the people still living in the Falklands." Various "Falklands Islanders" were dragged out by the media to praise Thatcher for having defended their "freedom" against Argentina.

But the real message here has nothing to do with Argentina, which now has a government that is fully aligned with the Anglo-Americans. The real issue is the "Falklands factor," the fact that Thatcher used the spring 1982 war with Argentina to bolster her sagging popularity, and to ensure her re-election later on. That is John Major's frame of reference today.

Worst defeat since 1945?

Indeed, the Tories have much to be worried about. The British establishment's London *Times* mouthpiece warned on April 1 that they were in danger of their "worst defeat since 1945." If Labour's poll margin were to be preserved on election day, this could "signify one of the most extraordinary electoral shifts since the war."

The Labourites' zoom in the polls certainly has less to do

with support for the party's leader Neil Kinnock, than with the disgust and anxiety of a population faced with unending reports of economic gloom and universal evidence of economic and infrastructural collapse.

These problems have been underscored by the widely publicized financial crises being faced by those real estate and property firms that were the bulwark of the 1979-90 Thatcher-era "free market" speculative booms. The first of these to be made public was the Reichmann family's Olympia and York conglomerate (see article, page 4). Then, over the March 27-29 weekend, the Heron International giant of convicted "Guinnessgate" protagonist Gerald Ronson announced that it was seeking a restructuring of its massive debt obligations. This announcement caused astonishment and consternation in a banking community already reeling from bad debt portfolios. On March 31, it was the turn of Speyhawk, a leading British property developer that declared over £200 million in pre-tax losses for the year. Speyhawk's management is opening talks with its 46 banks, the two chief of which are Barclay's and Citibank.

On top of all this, the Dun and Bradstreet firm revealed on March 29 that nearly 15,000 British companies had gone bankrupt in the first three months of 1992, a 54% rise compared to the same period last year. Small businesses were failing at the fastest rate, the firm stated.

All this news triggered a large 2% drop on the London stock exchange on April Fool's Day.

Yet another 'splendid little war'

The British government is desperately trying to divert attention away from this array of difficulties. Luckily, from the Tories' standpoint, March 31 was the date of the vote (10-0, with 5 absentions) of the U.N. Security Council authorizing a British-American-French-authored resolution mandating a package of sanctions against Libya, to go into effect by April 15, if Libya has not "complied unconditionally" with several demands, the most important of which is the handing-over of two senior Libyan officials charged with masterminding the December 1988 blowing up of the Pan Am 103 jet over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Also on March 31, the British Foreign Office publicly confirmed reports previously attributed to "diplomatic sources" that Britain was concerned that Libyan leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi was denying exit visas to an unspecified number of foreign workers in Libya. Before any proof was offered—and despite Libyan denials that this was happening—the British press rapidly began to speak of a potential "hostage-taking" by Qaddafi.

This controversy induced an upsurge of adrenalin flow in Prime Minister Major, who roused himself, during a campaign appearance, to declare that it was "intolerable that any exit visas whatsoever should be refused. We shall watch the situation, and make sure the security of our people is absolute, and they can get out."